

VZCZCXRO3389
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #2448/01 2180832
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 050832Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8682
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 002448

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2023

TAGS: PGOV PREL IZ IR

SUBJECT: SADR STATEMENTS: RIFLES FOR SOME, "JIHAD OF THOUGHTS" FOR THE REST

REF: A. 28 JULY 08 BAGHDAD O/I (JAM FREEZE IS PERMANENT)
1B. BAGHDAD 1637 (SADR'S ANTI-SOFA PROTEST)

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Brian Shukan for reasons 1.4 (b and d).

(C) 1. Summary: Sporting the newly-acquired title of "Hujjat al-Islam" that distinguishes him as a learned Islamic scholar, Muqtada al-Sadr issued a July 28 statement that divides the once-formidable Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia into two groups. One group has been given exclusive responsibility for armed resistance, while a second and much larger group has been tasked with performing an unarmed "Jihad of Thoughts against the Occupation." While senior Sadrist contacts insist that JAM is in the process of disbanding, Sadr's statement sets forth various conditions for participation in armed resistance, including orders to refrain from attacking civilians, damaging cities or public utilities, and "standing up" to the government only in self-defense on an "as needed" basis. Although the Iraqi street largely ignored Sadr's past demand for nation-wide mass protests against a bilateral GOI-USG agreement, Sadr repeated his call for public and cleric opposition and asked the GOI to refuse to sign the agreement. The last twelve months have not been kind to the Sadrist movement. A year ago, the movement seemed a lethal political-military juggernaut that enjoyed public prestige as defender of the Shia masses against Sunni depredations and "the Occupation." Today, the Sadrists have been routed by GOI and coalition forces in former strongholds, Prime Minister Maliki is riding a wave of popularity as a strong leader who humbled JAM, Sadrists will not participate under the Sadrist Trend banner in elections, and most of Sadr's armed loyalists are reduced to fighting an abstract "jihad of thoughts" against secular Western culture. While it would be imprudent to write off the viability and lethality of Sadr's movement - Sadr and his followers have demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience over the past five years - Sadr's grand vision of himself as leader of a mass uprising against the "dark forces of Occupation" looks ever more unlikely to transpire. End Summary.

"Conditional" Right Conferred on a Select Few

12. (C) Bearing the newly-acquired title of "Hujjat al-Islam" and employing a rhetorical device used by figures as doctrinally diverse as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Al-Qaida's Ayman al-Zawahiri, Sadr couches his July 28 statement as a reply to a question posed by an anonymous follower who asks "we hear some voices who say you have relinquished the resistance...is this correct?" Sadr responds that resistance is not only an intellectual, legal, and religious right but a "duty." However, Sadr cautions that "not everybody who carries a weapon is a resistance fighter" and admits to dismissing "some groups" from the movement for targeting "our brothers and beloved ones." He acknowledges that such groups have sullied the reputation "of our sect and the resistance." As further evidence of Sadr's

effort to rebrand the militant component of his movement, he goes so far as to demand the release of only those detainees "who have not dirtied their hands in sectarian fighting or in planting booby-trapped killing devices," thus appearing to consign some of the most violent self-professed Sadrists fighters to their fates in detention. Sadr outlined eleven conditions for participation in the resistance, including orders to refrain from attacking civilians, damaging cities and public utilities, and "standing up" to the government only in self-defense on an "as needed" basis.

¶3. (C) Sadr's July 28 statement builds on his previous June 13 statement in which he divided his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) into two groups. One group was given exclusive responsibility for armed resistance, while the second group - a "General Army comprised of millions" - is charged with practicing an unarmed "Jihad of Thoughts against the Occupation." In the June 13 statement, Sadr promised that the former group "would be mandated by us in writing soon," and the July 28 statement can be seen as this promised written mandate. In the latter statement, Sadr differentiates between "authorized" and "non-authorized" fighters: non-authorized fighters are prohibited from carrying weapons and must limit their involvement to "cultural fighting." Sadr never explicitly defined who is "authorized" to conduct armed resistance activities, claiming instead that membership in the "authorized" armed resistance "is based on conditions that cannot be disclosed, as the most important fundamentals of the resistance are to safeguard secrets in every way possible."

Senior Sadrist: JAM Is No More

BAGHDAD 00002448 002 OF 003

¶4. (C) According to several senior Sadrists contacts, Jaysh al-Mahdi, as a populist militia, no longer exists. In a July 27 telephonic conversation from his Najaf office (ref A), Sadrists Trend spokesman Salah al-Obaidi told us the 'freeze' on JAM activity is permanent and part of a larger plan to shift the Sadrists away from armed struggle and into "social, religious, and cultural work" (Obaidi is one of ten senior Sadrists appointed by Muqtada last month to form a board of directors-like coordination committee that will oversee all facets of Sadrists Trend activity). The Sadrists Governor of Maysan province Adil al-Maliki likened Sadr's June 13 statement to a disbanding of the militia, while Wasit Provincial Council member and Sadrists official Ahmed Ebrah said "there is no more JAM." Ebrah also dismissed Sadr's continuing talk of armed resistance, saying "I went to Najaf and asked this question to Salah al-Obaidi. He said it was just words spoken under Iranian pressure." We note that Sadr's current JAM "freeze" order, renewed in February after its August 2007 issuance, is set to expire in mid-August and Sadr is likely to issue a statement, possibly with further clarification regarding the direction of his movement, at that time.

Still Frothing Over USG-GOI Agreement

¶5. (C) With a few modest exceptions, the Iraqi street has all but ignored Sadr's May 27 statement in which he decried "the security agreement between the forces of darkness, by which I mean the Occupation, and the current Iraqi Government" and called for nation-wide mass protests following Friday noon prayers (Ref B). Seemingly undeterred by this tepid reaction, Sadr's July 28 statement calls for Iraqis to "stand firm" against the signing of a bilateral agreement "between the government and the Occupier even if it is for 'friendship' or something else." He also asks "religious authorities and scholars from all groups and sects" to "embrace the noble resistance" and to oppose a bilateral agreement through fatwas and public statements. Finally, he calls upon the GOI to refuse to sign the agreement, and he

offers to support them "publicly and politically" in this act. Without disclosing names, Sadr claimed that "some religious scholars have prohibited such signing" (we note that Sadr may be referring to Iran-based clerics such as Kadhim al-Hairi, but also may be feigning inside knowledge of objections purportedly raised by senior Iraqi clerics). Sadr concluded his statement by requesting the UN and international human rights organizations to scrutinize USG and GOI treatment of detainees.

Comment: Rope-a-Dope Or Down For the Count?

¶6. (C) The last twelve months have not been kind to Muqtada al-Sadr and his followers. Only one year ago, armed Sadrists assassinated two southern governors and struck hard at their ISCI/Badr rivals with apparent impunity; Sadrists controlled significant portions of Iraq from Basrah to Baghdad; and the Trend's political wing was widely expected to score big wins in upcoming elections. Today, government and coalition forces control the streets of Basrah, Amarah, and even the symbolic stronghold of Baghdad's Sadr City; Prime Minister Maliki is enjoying a surge of popularity as a strong and resolute leader who brought JAM to its knees; Sadrists will not participate under the Sadrist Trend banner in elections; and most of Sadr's armed loyalists are reduced to fighting an abstract "jihad of thoughts" against secular Western culture.

Two moments were particularly pivotal in the Trend's descent. The first occurred in August 2007, when Sadr issued his "freeze" order following JAM's disastrous attempt to seize control of Karbala's sacred Shia shrines. The second came in late March during Maliki's "Operation Charge of the Knights," when Sadr ordered his followers in Basrah and elsewhere to "lay down your arms." In all of his statements since March, Sadr has pleaded, threatened, and cajoled, but never issued the open declaration of war against the GOI that many expected and feared. Ongoing Iraqi Army and coalition operations, combined with a lack of clear leadership direction, have left Sadr's followers dispirited and scattered, with hundreds in detention and many following their leader's footprints to Iran.

¶7. (C) Sadr's efforts to rebrand his movement, while never losing an opportunity to inveigh against "the Occupation," are a recognition of a changing Iraq and a bid to remain politically relevant. But in reorienting Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Office of the Martyr Sadr to perform "humanitarian, religious, and cultural work," Sadr is undermining the very source of his strength: the thousands of eager young men willing to take to the streets against "the Occupier" and its

BAGHDAD 00002448 003 OF 003

Iraqi allies. It would be less than prudent to write off the viability and lethality of Sadr's movement, as Sadr and his followers have demonstrated a remarkable degree of resilience in past years. However, while Sadr's "authorized resistance" and Iranian-backed militants who profess to act in Sadr's name remain dangerous and will continue to pose a threat to Iraq's stability for the foreseeable future, Sadr's grand vision of himself leading a mass uprising against the "dark forces of Occupation" looks ever more unlikely to transpire.
End Comment.
CROCKER